



Pennsylvania being urged to drop the 'hammer' on young casino gamblers



Evan R. Sanders | Tribune-Review

Children as young as 14 are sneaking into casinos to try their luck at a roulette wheel or slot machine — a costly problem for Pennsylvania gaming operators who are lobbying for tougher penalties for underage gamblers.

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Published: Monday, November 4, 2013 12:01 a.m.

Children as young as 14 are sneaking into casinos to try their luck at a roulette wheel or slot machine — a costly problem for Pennsylvania gaming operators who are lobbying for tougher penalties for underage gamblers.

Robert DeSalvio, president of the Sands Casino-Resort in Bethlehem, said the punishment for anyone

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younger than 21 who attempts to gamble in a casino should act as a deterrent.

Underage gamblers receive a citation and fine of as much as \$1,000, but DeSalvio wants to take away their driver's licenses for a year.

"We feel so strongly about it," said Sands spokeswoman Julia Corwin. "We want to do everything in our power to end underage gambling in the casinos."

Doug Harbach, spokesman for the state Gaming Control Board, said underage gambling is a "pretty big issue" at the state's 12 casinos. Since 2008, the board has fined casinos more than \$1.6 million for 127 incidents of underage gambling, records show. The incidents included children as young as 14 caught playing slot machines.

At board meetings, members routinely vote to add underage wagerers to the agency's "involuntary exclusion list" of people who are banned from the casinos.

Casinos use cutting-edge facial recognition software and surveillance equipment so sophisticated it can peer into a woman's purse. They check IDs, but offenders still slip through.

Pittsburgh attorney Stuart Kaplan, who has worked on various gaming-related matters, said tighter security at the front door — including scanning IDs to get background information — would be the best deterrent.

"The typical kid just wants to get in ... they don't believe they're going to get caught," he said.

A costly problem

When casinos catch underage gamblers, the law requires the business to report the incident to the gaming board.

Sometimes, young gamblers aren't caught until they've wagered.

That was the case when a 20-year-old from New York won an undisclosed jackpot on a Sands slot machine in August. He was forced to forfeit his winnings when officials checking his ID for tax purposes realized his photo did not match his appearance.

Sands has been fined \$220,000 since 2008 for incidents of underage gaming, according to state records.

The state fined Rivers Casino on the North Shore \$246,000 between 2010, when it opened, and 2012, records show. The Meadows Racetrack and Casino in North Strabane has been fined \$80,000 since 2008, according to records.

The Lady Luck Casino at Nemaquin Woodlands Resort in Fayette County operates a little differently. Because of the type of gaming license it holds, it is required to limit casino access to resort hotel guests, membership holders and patrons of resort amenities.

There have been no infractions there.

"We are confident that we do everything in our power to control access to our floor," spokeswoman Jill Alexander said.

Meadows officials say they've stepped up their campaign against young bettors.

"The Meadows has fostered an increased level of awareness of underage gambling by training our security guards and staff, and educating our guests," said Sean Sullivan, vice president and general manager at the Meadows. He didn't offer further details.

"We take this matter very seriously and support the gaming board in every effort to prevent underage gambling," said Craig Clark, general manager of Rivers, offering few specifics in an emailed statement.

Testing the boundaries

Experts say that in recent years, young people swapped gambling for buying cigarettes or alcohol as a rite of passage.

They say it can begin innocently when a youngster goes with a parent or grandparent to a weekly bingo game. As they get older, the child might receive a scratch-off lottery ticket for a birthday. In their teens, they feel the lure of bigger gambling opportunities.

"We are an actively gambling society," said Jody Bechtold of Mt. Lebanon, a social worker and nationally recognized gambling counselor. "There are not many messages that say, 'This is bad for you.'"

Teenage gambling is the fastest-growing addiction today, said Jim Pappas of the Council on Compulsive Gambling in Pennsylvania.

"They see an opportunity — just as they see with underage drinking — to see if they can do it," Pappas said.

The gambling rate among teens is climbing, said Karen Bennett, human services administrator for Greene

County, where a survey showed that 14.1 percent of sixth-graders said they gambled for money in 2011, up from 9.9 percent in 2009. Statewide, 15.3 percent of students in grades 6 to 12 placed bets for money in 2011, down from 17.5 percent in 2009.

Bigger 'hammer' needed

Only state legislators can change the penalties for underage gambling, and some have tried, including state Rep. Paul Costa, D-Turtle Creek, whose 2011 bill to increase the penalties never gained momentum.

Costa wanted first-time offenders to face a summary charge carrying a fine of as much as \$2,000, or a \$5,000 fine for repeat offenders. He is considering whether he should reintroduce the measure.

In New Jersey, young bettors can face a fine of as much as \$1,000 and a six-month driver's license suspension. In Nevada and Ohio, underage gaming carries a \$1,000 fine and up to six months in jail.

Pennsylvania needs a bigger "hammer" when it comes to underage gaming violations, said Michael D. Sklar, an Atlantic City attorney who has appeared before the gaming control board on underage gambling issues.

"In practicality, most municipal courts give a slap on the wrist," he said. "If I'm a kid, is that really going to be a disincentive?"

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